White Southern Presbyterians and the scars from the fight for racial justice

William Yoo

Several White pastors joined the fight for racial justice, many remained silent despite their support for civil rights, and others loudly favored segregation, believing the unjust world they inhabited was divinely ordained. None escaped unscathed.

Martin Sheen – perhaps best known for playing the fictional U.S. president in the television show "The West Wing" (1999 - 2006) – often tells this story when he speaks about the importance of activism, civil rights and environmental justice: A person dies and arrives at the gates of heaven. St. Peter welcomes the person and says, "Show me your scars." But the person does not have any scars. Peter disapprovingly shakes his head and asks, "Was there nothing worth fighting for?" Sheen then prompts his listeners to consider their own lives and to find something worth fighting for, a cause that is urgent, important, personal and uncompromisingly true.

In the mid-20th century, one of the most pressing matters was the push to end racial segregation. Several White Presbyterians in the Southern states fought for integration and for the construction of a more racially just church, society and nation. Some supported Black leaders such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King Jr. and Gayraud S. Wilmore. White Presbyterians joined their demonstrations to protest segregation and demand equal access to education, employment, housing, public transportation and voting. Others worked just as hard to resist the demands and implications of the Civil Rights Movement. And they all had scars because the fight for racial justice was the primary contention in their lives.

In the mid-20th century, one of the most pressing matters was the push to end racial segregation.

In the *Presbyterian Outlook* in 1951, James McBride Dabbs, a White author and ruling elder in Mayesville, South Carolina, explained racism as the central grave injustice underlying every other social problem: "The South has been a colonial area, and is backward economically; and any easing of the economic problem would certainly ease the racial problem. The racial problem, however, has a firmer grip upon the hearts of men, and is more immediately entangled with man's sinfulness." Dabbs observed that the unjust walls of segregation were starting to crumble. Black military veterans had returned from World War II seeking equal opportunities after fighting for their nation, and growing interracial coalitions of young people were working toward integration.

Dabbs surmised that the "so-called Christian church" might stand as "the last stronghold of segregation." Some White churches refused to engage with the topic of racism. They wanted their sanctuaries to be impenetrable sites of refuge, free from the confusion and disruption of the Civil Rights Movement swirling all around them. But White Presbyterians found it increasingly difficult to dismiss the fight for racial justice, as the topic filled the front pages of their newspapers,

enveloped everyday discussions with neighbors and burst forth in the public square through marches, sit-ins and other forms of public protest.

CHRISTIANITY MEANS SOCIAL JUSTICE FOR ALL PEOPLE, WHITE AND BLACK

In his 2011 book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree,* Black theologian **James Cone** maintained that "although white southerners lost the Civil War, they did not lose the cultural war — the struggle to define America as a white nation and blacks as a subordinate race unfit for governing and therefore incapable of political and social equality." Cone explained how the White population enforced supremacy over Black people through legal measures such as segregation, as well as extralegal methods such as lynching and mob violence. In its 2017 resource titled *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror,* the Equal Justice Initiative reports that 4,084 racial terror lynchings took place in 12 Southern states between 1877 and 1950. Some White Presbyterians no longer wanted to participate in this ongoing cultural war to uphold what they knew was their wicked and sinful world of White dominance and Black degradation.

Several White pastors joined the fight for racial justice, but many more did not publicly support the Civil Rights Movement. Some privately wanted to abolish segregation, but they publicly refrained from expressing their views because they feared the consequences. Others favored segregation and believed that the unjust world they inhabited was divinely ordained. These ministers did not have to worry about public disapproval, within their churches or the wider society, so they confidently preached about the benefits of segregation.

When pastors combated racial injustice from their pulpits, they received wounds and scars. In 1957, John Steedman Lyles – a 31-year-old graduate of Union Presbyterian Seminary and pastor of a Presbyterian church in Marion, South Carolina – applied the prophetic teachings of the book of Amos to the Civil Rights Movement. In the weeks before his sermon, Lyles and his congregation, along with people across the Southern states, focused on the situation unfolding in Little Rock, Arkansas, where nine Black teenagers sought to study at the previously all-White Central High School. White mobs gathered outside the school to prevent these Black students from entering the building. In addition, the Arkansas governor, Orbal Faubus, ordered the state's National Guard to prohibit these students from walking into their school. White people in Marion were talking about the controversy in Little Rock, and they debated the merits of President Dwight Eisenhower's decision to federalize the National Guard and send additional U.S. Army soldiers to accompany the Black students into the high school. Newspapers in South Carolina generally praised the actions of the Arkansas governor and derided the nation's president for what they insisted was a violation of states' rights.

Every public school in South Carolina was segregated when Lyles preached his sermon on the sin of racial segregation. Lyles underscored how the prophet Amos excoriated the false worship of religious people who ignored the divine call to enact justice and seek righteousness. He drew a direct connection to the White Southern sin of "enforced racial segregation" that was "built on the myth of superior and inferior peoples."

Several White pastors joined the fight for racial justice, but many more did not publicly support the Civil Rights Movement.

Lyles insisted that "Christianity means social justice for all people, white and black." He also declared: "Thus I would be derelict as your pastor if I did not make it clear that our treatment of our fellow man – white and black – has eternal consequences for our souls. The kind of society we try to build must be explained to God."

Lyles crafted this sermon as the first of a two-part series on race relations. But the pastor never preached the second one. The elders serving on the church's session asked him to refrain from preaching the

Online reading at pres-outlook.org:

2008: "Looking Around" *Are Presbyterians losing traditions of social justice?*
— Donald W. Shriver Jr.

2015: "The time is always right to do right" *Martin Luther King Jr.'s Unfinished Agenda*
— Jill Duffield

2024: "The case for Black racial repair in the PC(USA)"
— William Yoo"

2024: "Breaking the Miller Cycle" *The Center for the Repair of Historical Harms*
— Jermaine Ross-Allam

second sermon on the following Sunday. Soon thereafter Lyles and the session agreed that he would leave the church. Lyles appealed to the Bible and asked the congregation to behold whether their society measured up to God's love and justice. The congregation instead determined that their pastor did not meet their expectations. Public schools in South Carolina did not begin to integrate until 1963, nine years after the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in public schools in its ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas.*

In 2022, Betsy Lyles Swetenburg preached a sermon using the same scriptural text that Lyles, her grandfather, used 65 years before. She recalled a conversation about his courageous ministry in Marion. Swetenburg asked her grandfather why he did not talk about that time, and he answered: "What is there to say, Betsy? I preached the truth and got run out of town. Your father was a few months old. Your grandmother was scared. We didn't know where we were going to go. It wasn't glamorous." Swetenburg offered a powerful rejoinder about how truth-telling is not glamorous but is urgently necessary: "We must tell the truth about the world as it is so that we can begin to work toward the world as it could be, as it should be."

THERE IS A LINE WHICH MUST NOT BE CROSSED

My work as a historian of Christianity in the United States includes teaching in congregations in addition to my seminary classroom. I find it invigorating to speak in churches, and I am grateful for these invitations. One question that arises from time to time is why I focus so much on the history of racism, and I also sometimes feel this accompanying implicit challenge: "Aren't there other things for you to research and write about?"

My answer is that an honest historian cannot ignore the power of racism and how it has shaped American Christianity. I am not overemphasizing racism and elevating an issue from the margins of our history. The fierce contest for racial justice was crucially important for all Americans because racism touched every area of their lives. It determined what schools they would attend, the neighborhoods they resided in, the jobs they could obtain and the churches where they worshiped.

A young African American boy watches a mob march past to protest the admission of the "Little Rock Nine" to Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. South Carolina pastor John Steedman Lyles preached in favor of school integration, applying teachings from the Book of Amos, and was subsequently asked to leave his church. In contrast, Presbyterian pastor L. Nelson Bell, who founded The Southern Presbyterian Journal and admitted "we in the South have a race problem, and we should face it squarely," still felt social segregation was divinely sanctioned and necessary in American society. Photo by John T. Bledsoe – Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

L. Nelson Bell grew up in Virginia but spent much of his adulthood in China as a medical missionary. He was a cradle Presbyterian who grew in his faith as a teenager worshiping in a Presbyterian church in Waynesboro. After graduating from Richmond's Medical College of Virginia, Bell became a surgeon at one of the largest Presbyterian mission hospitals in China in 1916. Bell and his wife, Virginia Myers Bell, lived in China until 1941, when geopolitical strife in East Asia forced them and many other American missionaries to leave the region.

The Bells spent the rest of their lives in western North Carolina. They lived in Montreat, and L. Nelson Bell practiced medicine in Swannanoa and Asheville. One of their children, Ruth, married Billy Graham in 1943. Bell and Graham worked together to establish a popular magazine, *Christianity Today,* in 1956. Graham was growing in stature as an evangelical revivalist. To launch this new journalistic enterprise, with ambitions to match the reach of Graham's ministry, Bell applied his own publishing experience from founding *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* (SPJ) in 1942.

Bell also grappled with the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement and its implications for congregations across his denomination as well as for the conference center near his home in Montreat. In the first issue of SPJ, Bell explained that his motivation was to create a magazine to preserve the message of "original Christianity" and repel the influence of the social gospel in "our Southern Presbyterian Church." The social gospel was simultaneously a specific historical movement at the turn of the 20th century and a broader theological conception emphasizing how Christianity must address individual salvation and social reform. Bell assailed how some Christians were urging White churches to join the struggle for racial justice. He wanted to fight back with a magazine to provide White Presbyterian readers with the ammunition to maintain both the church as it was and the world as they knew it.

In his writing, Bell made clear that the purpose of protecting the racial line was to prevent interracial sexual relations and marriages.

Bell and other SPJ writers endeavored to make a distinction between what they saw as the incidental sins in their segregated society and the just intentions of segregation, when Christians practiced the system in accordance with scriptural principles. In 1944 Bell acknowledged, "We in the South have a race problem and we should face it squarely." In the same paragraph, he specifically addressed the need for African Americans to possess "equal opportunities for education and gainful employment." But Bell devoted 13 other paragraphs to defending racial segregation as a divinely sanctioned, necessary foundation for American society.

To support his argument, Bell found biblical evidence in the Noahic curse of Ham in Genesis 9 and in Paul's sermon on Mars Hill in Acts 17. Noah's diatribe pronounced shame upon one of his sons, Ham, for seeing his father naked in an inebriated stupor, and Noah decreed honor upon two other sons, Japheth and Shem. Bell pointed to that passage as an explanation for fixed racial differences in humanity that required separation. As for Acts 17, Bell's appeal countered a scriptural interpretation of the same passage employed by 19th-century abolitionists and 20th-century civil rights activists. Whereas they drew inspiration from the notion of a common humanity in the words of Acts 17:26 – "From one ancestor [God] made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth" – Bell argued that the verse's final clause demonstrated that God also determined "the boundaries of the places where they would live." That clause meant, Bell asserted, that racial segregation was God's will. Bell instructed his readers to therefore uphold segregation because "there is a line which must not be crossed.

"AM I TO GATHER THAT YOU ARE WILLING FOR YOUR DAUGHTER TO MARRY A NEGRO?"

In his writing, Bell made clear that the purpose of protecting the racial line was to prevent interracial sexual relations and marriages. He warned White Presbyterians to resist the lure of those Christians who naively spoke of God's wondrous love as calling them to break down racial barriers. Bell plainly stated that one dire consequence of integration was the increasing likelihood of romantic relationships between White women and Black men. He shared a vignette of a Black soldier in a military hospital who approached a White woman about going out on a date. Bell cautioned that such incidents would become common in a racially integrated society.

In 1947, Bell challenged Garfield Bromley Oxnam to consider the implications of Oxnam's advocacy for desegregation. Oxnam was a White Methodist bishop and president of the Federal Council of Churches, an ecumenical association that in 1950 joined several other ecumenical bodies to form the National Council of Churches. Bell asked Oxnam, "Am I to gather that you are willing for your daughter to marry a Negro?" Bell then turned his attention to the Montreat Conference Center and its programs for young people. Because these programs involved social and recreational opportunities in addition to the spiritual component, Bell feared the "tragic and disastrous results" if White and Black Christian teenagers participated together in activities from sunrise to sunset. Unlike White adults, he argued, White children did not fully know the absurd but real customs that simultaneously conveyed Southern niceties and upheld White supremacy. And Bell was especially worried about what might happen after sunset.

In 1950, Bell seized the opportunity to bar Black adolescents from the Montreat Conference Center. Montreat's board of directors appointed Bell, Calvin Grier Davis (pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Asheville) and J. McDowell

Richards (president of Columbia Theological Seminary) to form a special committee. The task was to make a recommendation about the presence of Black guests at the center. The board enacted the special committee's twofold recommendation to desegregate adult programs (with separate lodging facilities) but to prohibit the integration of youth programs.

In the SPJ, Bell defended Montreat's new policy from all sides. He asked those who were furious about formally welcoming Black adults to consider that Black commissioners to the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) General Assembly were already staying at the conference center during its meetings. There they were subject to "embarrassing restrictions" and "miserable makeshifts" in dining and lodging that made the occasions uncomfortable for both Black and White commissioners. Bell also assured SPJ readers that no Black guests would stay in the Assembly Inn, the conference center's premier lodging facility.

Bell also responded to critics who railed against Montreat's ban of Black youth. For years, both the adult organizers of youth programming and the young participants themselves had been pushing Montreat to desegregate. Both groups were therefore dismayed by the new policy upholding segregation of the youth programs. One pastor, John S. McMullen, bitterly complained: "There is a strong irony in the fact that the young people of our church have been the spearhead in pressing for the admission of Negroes to Montreat, and now they are the only ones excluded from the fellowship they have so long desired."

Bell addressed these grievances by asking why Montreat should administer a policy that did not exist in their wider society. Black and White pupils who did not attend the same schools need not participate in the same conferences. Montreat's board of directors resisted renewed calls to fully integrate after the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in public schools in 1954, and the board reaffirmed its policy to bar Black youth in 1959. The board finally relented one year later and removed the conference center's ban.

Bell continued to write in the magazines that he had founded, and he traveled around the world to support missionary endeavors. He also fought at least one more battle against racial justice at his beloved Montreat. In 1965, when the Christian Action Conference organizers invited Martin Luther King Jr. to speak at Montreat, Bell opposed the move. He addressed the PCUS General Assembly and urged the commissioners to compel the conference's organizers to withdraw the invitation. But Bell's church was changing, and he lost this fight when the General Assembly voted 311 to 120 to affirm the invitation.

Lyles, Bell and other White Presbyterians had scars from the fight for racial justice. To return to Sheen's story about Peter's question at the gates of heaven, one imagines Lyles humbly sharing that some of his scars derived from his preaching in 1957. Lyles would likely also express that his scars are small compared to the scars of the Black persons who endured these racial oppressions and still bravely fought to remake their world with the love and justice of God.

Lyles, Bell and other White Presbyterians had scars from the fight for racial justice.

The lives of John Steedman Lyles and L. Nelson Bell include far more than this article can address. Lyles's faithful ministry did not end with his ouster from a church in Marion. He earned a master of theology degree from Union Presbyterian Seminary and a doctor of ministry degree from Princeton Theological Seminary, and he pastored several congregations in Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia. Lyles also served as the first executive presbyter of the Central Florida Presbytery.

But Bell also had scars from his fight. He could explain how hard he had worked to uphold racial segregation in his church and nation. Perhaps this scar came from his magazine writing, and that scar came from his efforts to bar Black youth from Montreat. He could exclaim that he did it all for the applause of heaven. I don't think Saint Peter would be smiling. ◆

DR. WILLIAM YOO is associate professor of American religious and cultural history at Columbia Theological Seminary. He is the author of *Reckoning with History: Settler Colonialism, Slavery, and the Making of American Christianity* and several other titles. He also serves on the board of directors for the Montreat Conference Center.